

# “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan”--Bob Dylan (1963)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Bob Dylan*

Any album that includes the first rendition of “Blowin’ in the Wind,” the unofficial anthem of the 1960s, would have to be included in a registry of America’s most important recordings. And, so, based upon that merit and the remarkable other songs to be found on Bob Dylan’s second LP, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan” was named to the National Registry in its inaugural year of 2002.

Bob Dylan (nee Robert Allen Zimmerman; he took his stage name partially from poet Dylan Thomas) released his first album, “Bob Dylan,” in 1962. Looking baby-faced and clutching his guitar on the album’s cover, this eponymous album gave little hint of the importance Dylan would take on before the end of the decade. Mostly this can be ascribed to his debut’s heavy reliance on songs written by others. Though Dylan often provided the arrangements, his first collection of songs, like “In My Time of Dyin’,” “Man of Constant Sorrow,” and “Freight Train Blues,” had all been recorded and made famous by others before. As a songwriter, Dylan himself provided only two tunes to the original set, “Song to Woody” and “Talkin’ New York.”

“The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan” (originally titled “Bob Dylan’s Blues”), however, Dylan’s second album, also recorded for Columbia, would change that. Though several of the album’s 13 tracks are based upon early folk songs, all but two of the selections would be written by the artist himself. Dylan said at the time, “I felt real good about doing an album with my own material.”

Recorded between April 1962 and April 1963, today, the track listing for “Freewheelin’” reads almost like a primer for ‘60s rock and folk: “Blowin’ in the Wind”; “Girl from the North Country”; “Masters of War”; “Down the Highway”; “Bob Dylan’s Blues”; “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”; “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”; “Bob Dylan’s Dream”; “Oxford Town”; “Talkin’ World War III Blues”; “Corrina, Corrina”; “Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance”; and “I Shall Be Free.”

Remarkably, Bob Dylan was only 22 years-old when he wrote these songs and recorded this album.

According to various sources, Dylan struggled mightily with the album, mainly the final selection of songs to be included. There are over a dozen outtakes from his sessions for “Freewheelin’” and, well after the project was “finished,” Dylan returned to the studio to record new songs that ultimately ended up on the record at the expense of earlier numbers. (These included: “The Death of Emmett Till,” “Let Me Die in My Footsteps,” and “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues.”)

Even in an album that is practically all highlights, a few songs still stand out:

The album begins with Dylan's landmark "Blowin' in the Wind," which, by the time of this release, had just become a hit for folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary. Allegedly written in all of ten minutes while sitting in a cafe, it would go on to be covered by hundreds of artists and has since been adopted throughout the decades as a theme for world peace, civil rights and other political movements. According to many accounts, Dylan, originally, didn't think much of the song and it almost didn't make the cut for the final LP.

Written in Italy, the album's lovely "Girl from the North Country" is the album's second song. It's another classic having since been embraced by both the folk and country worlds. Its message is far less politicized than "Blowin' in the Wind," illustrating that Dylan, even then, was capable of far more than the "finger-pointin' songs" he would soon become most famous for.

Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" has since been called a "small epic." It is, according to "Freewheelin's" liner notes, "a desperate sort of song." Since its authoring, the song has been interpreted a variety of ways including as a rally against nuclear fall out. (Dylan has since disputed this.) Regardless, it possesses one of the music's most famous opening refrains: "Oh, where have you gone, my blue-eyed son?/And where have you been, my darling young one?"

"Masters of War," based upon the melody of an English folk song, "Nottamun Town," and an earlier arrangement by folksinger Jean Ritchie, is perhaps Dylan's most overt anti-war song. He said at the time, "I've never really written anything like that before. I don't sing songs which hope people will die, but I couldn't help it in this one. The song is a sort of striking out, a reaction to the last straw, a feeling of what CAN you do."

"Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," another song that has gone on to be covered by a host of other artists, is a change in tone. Dylan wrote it when a long-time girlfriend of his took an indefinite trip to Italy. Its title and message was, no doubt, a bit of catharsis and perhaps an exercise in self-convincing for its writer. It has since been called a "falling-out-of-love" song.

Throughout the album, instrumentation is stunningly minimal—mostly just Dylan, his guitar and harmonica. Intentional or not, the album's economics causes the lyrics and vocals to sound all the more intimate and immediate. In its pared down elegance, there is something almost anti-establishment about the album's sound and recording process.

Adding to the works' anti-establishment vibe was its simple, unstyled cover image. It's just the youthful Dylan—looking James Dean-esque--and then girlfriend Suze Rotolo (the inspiration behind "Don't Think Twice"), huddled together against the New York cold and walking down the city's West 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Greenwich Village. In contrast to the carefully arranged, heavily art-directed album covers of the era, "Freewheelin's" casual cool spoke of newness, youth and a lack of artifice.

Surprisingly, at the time of its release, not all the reviews for "Freewheelin'" were positive ones. Famously, a Minneapolis folk music newsletter called it a "great disappointment" adding that Dylan's performance on it was "affected" and "pretentious." Granted, Dylan's voice and cryptic but confrontational lyrics were (and are) an acquired taste to many. Whether his version of "Blowin' in the Wind" would have been a success if it had hit the airwaves before Peter, Paul and Mary's is open to speculation.

But "Freewheelin'" has more than stood the test of time. Almost everyone of its songs have since been covered and sampled by other artists, from Rosanne Cash to Judy Collins, from Johnny Cash to Pearl Jam as well as Neil Young, Elvis Presley, Stevie Wonder, Marianne Faithfull, the Staple Singers, Odetta, Dolly Parton and others. "Rolling Stone" magazine has

gone on to praise the album for its “poetry” and “articulate fury,” adding “[Dylan’s] grip on grit, truth and beauty [...] still changes everyone who hears this album, four decades later.”

Dylan once said, “Anything I can sing, I call a song. Anything I can’t sing, I call a poem. Anything I can’t sing or anything that’s too long to be a poem, I call a novel. But my novels don’t have the usual story-lines. They’re about my feelings at a certain place at a certain time.”

For many artists, an album as fully realized as “Freewheelin’” would mark a career milestone, a total high point. But for Dylan, this would just be the beginning of an extraordinary career filled with masterpieces. “Blonde on Blonde,” “Slow Train Coming,” “Love and Theft,” “Bringin’ It All Back Home,” “Time Out of Mind,” “Highway 61 Revisited,” and “Blood on the Tracks” were all still to come. As he is depicted on the cover, “Freewheelin’” was just the start of a long and interesting road.

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